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ABSTRACT

Members of the Council of Chief State School Officers (CCSSO) have been deeply involved in re-creating America's educational system to prepare it for the new century. They have been strong advocates and effective partners in designing and implementing standards-based reform, supporting higher quality professional practice in the classroom, more opportunity for early childhood education, and extended learning beyond the regular school day and year. Council members, however, still need to pay attention to criticism and confront issues realistically. Comprehensive standards-based strategies involve teachers being prepared for and supported to teach to the new academic standards, students having access to the programs and materials they are expected to master, and schools having authority to make program, personnel, and budgetary decisions to ensure all students meet the standards. Council agenda items for 2001 include promoting instructional change in every classroom, identifying examples of districts and schools that improve, measuring progress more effectively, developing broad support, coordinating services, enhancing states' roles, supporting the Deputies' Leadership Commission's actions in strengthening state leadership for learning, and implementing the CCSSO Action Plan for leadership for learning. (RT)

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The 2001 Council Priority

ENSURING THE EDUCATION RIGHTS OF ALL CHILDREN

ED 464 421

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Council of Chief State School Officers

The Council of Chief State School Officers (CCSSO) is a nationwide, nonprofit organization composed of the public officials—appointed and elected—who lead departments of elementary and secondary education in the states, the District of Columbia, the Department of Defense Education Activity and five extra-state jurisdictions.

CCSSO organizes its members' consensus on major educational issues and expresses their positions to civic and professional organizations, federal agencies, Congress and the public.

CCSSO is a partner in several coalitions with major education, business and service organizations dedicated to improving elementary and secondary education for America's students.

Council of Chief State School Officers
2001

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ENSURING THE EDUCATION RIGHTS OF ALL CHILDREN

The 2001 Council Priority

The philosopher Alfred North Whitehead described change as a force that "drives mankind from its old anchorage." The past 20 years have been a period of unprecedented change in American education. Schools have been driven far from their old anchorage as globalization, technology, and the demand for high-level skills have moved from the exception to the rule.

After nearly a decade of study, analysis, and state actions, policymakers and educators reached consensus in the late 1980s that standards-based reform was the most promising strategy for improving schools and raising student achievement. For the first time in history, we set national goals for education, and virtually all states committed themselves to set clear and rigorous standards for what each student should know and be able to do. The nation and the states embarked on what we knew would be a long and arduous journey to re-create education systems prepared for the enormous challenges of the new century.

Members of the Council of Chief State School Officers have been in the vanguard every step of that journey. We have been strong advocates and effective partners in designing and implementing standards-based reform. We have advocated high standards and insisted that they apply to ALL children. We have worked for rigorous assessments to measure progress. To accelerate success for all students, we have supported higher quality professional practice in the classroom, more opportunity for early childhood education, extended learning beyond the regular school day and year, greater use of learning technologies, and strengthened leadership for learning. We have pressed for federal action to assist states and localities in developing greater opportunities for all students. And we have learned a lot about the challenge of transforming our dreams and expectations into success for all students.

Our nation, however, still needs to understand the depth and breadth of this overhaul of elementary and secondary education. This is nothing less than a sea change in the system, and it is hard work. Building the capacity of schools and teachers around best practices to carry out standards-based reform is still the challenge ahead. The challenge is daunting; constraints and demands of legitimate conflicting interests have given rise to some criticism and doubt that the nation can provide for its education needs. There are backlashes against high-stakes testing, calls for changes of direction, and skepticism about the "All Kids" agenda. Early critics of standards-based reform are renewing their opposition.

Responding to Today's Challenge

These concerns cannot be ignored or dismissed. On the contrary, we must confront them realistically. As state chiefs, we should respond to the criticism in two ways. First, we should be unequivocal in stating the case for standards-based reform to parents, students, and the public at large. Polls have consistently indicated strong public support for the standards movement, but we must not take that support for granted, especially as the drive for excellence in education begins to pinch. To protect the educational rights of children, we must engage the nation in an informed discussion of these complex issues, present the evidence of progress, and develop a shared commitment to staying the course. Second, wherever education decisions are being made, we must reassert the systemic nature of standards-based reform and do all we can to assure we remain true to the original design. We have learned valuable lessons over the past decade that will help, if we have the wisdom to act on them and the courage to accelerate implementation.

It's About Balance

Difficult as it is, we must keep the focus on the system—standards, teacher quality, access to learning, and the levers of accountability—to keep all components of the strategy in a balance that has yet to be attained in many states. In some locations, certain parts of the strategy have been emphasized more than others. While it might seem that all advances are positive, overemphasis on one component in a coherent strategy can distort the entire system. For example, a state or district might compromise the rigor of standards to assure that all students can master them. But in the end, the resulting achievement is illusory. On the other hand, a state or district can hold fast to high standards and testing without assuring that schools, teachers, and students have the capacity to pass. In this instance, standards produce few, if any, positive results. In either case, standards that are not linked to high expectations and opportunities for *all* children can become just another mechanism for sorting and separating children.

Standards are the lever for moving elementary and secondary education in a new direction. But to succeed, standards-based strategies must be comprehensive. Much of the power comes from the interaction of all the pieces. We must adapt every part of the existing system and align it with the standards strategy.

- Teachers must be prepared for and supported to teach to the new academic standards.

- Students must have access to the programs and materials they are expected to master, which means adequate resources and equal opportunity.

- Schools must have authority to make program, personnel, and budgetary decisions to assure all students meet the standards.

These are the elements of standards-based reform as conceived more than a decade ago. The reform must move forward within a fully integrated system that emphasizes both accountability and capacity.

Accountability with Capacity

There is a growing concern that efforts to expand accountability in education have overrun efforts to enhance the capacity of schools. Specifically, the establishment of new high-stakes testing is the focal point. The measurement of system success is the "bottom line" of high student performance. Although progress on rigorous assessments has often been strong, in many cases the results for individual students and schools offer stark evidence of how difficult it is to make substantial gains in achievement in short periods.

The gap between expectations and results has created anxiety about progress. In some places, a backlash against testing has prompted calls for retrenchment of reforms. This should not be surprising. Accountability has always been a central and essential element of standards-based reform; the painful consequence of poor performance has been inevitable from the outset. But we must not penalize the students unless the adults are doing the new job—delivering standards-based instruction in every classroom. Our response cannot be either to reject accountability or indiscriminately defend it.

As chief state school officers we must assure that accountability is carefully designed and fairly administered. We must assure that tests actually measure performance against standards; that students have the opportunity to learn the material tested before being held accountable; that multiple measures are used to assess student performance and important decisions are not

made solely on the basis of one test score. We must deliver in this way because the future of standards-based reform—and thus the educational well-being of children—depends on how effectively we balance accountability with capacity.

Schools are challenged to compensate for the devastating impact of poverty and discrimination, to cope with increased enrollments and a flood of new immigrants for whom English is a second language, to neutralize the negative consequences of popular culture, and to keep up with an unprecedented explosion of knowledge. They are expected to accomplish these tasks in the context of a new and rigorous standards-based system. To expect them to succeed without increasing their capacity is pure folly.

2001: Accelerating Success for All Children

Through this statement of our 2001 priority, Council members are committed to a series of actions:

1. We commit to providing for the needs of *all* children. The nation serves our children well only if we provide an education of high expectation and challenge. We fail our children if we do not set the standards high because we know that across the globe, other parents, educators, and political leaders are challenging their students and preparing them more rigorously for the 21st century than in the past. Our children must be educated as well as any in the world.

2. We commit to implementing *all* the elements of a standards-based system. This includes increasing advocacy for sufficient public investment in education and ensuring adequacy of equitable funding. We must prepare every teacher and school leader with the capacity to assure our children are first in the world.

3. We support adjustment of the speed and scope of education reform implementation, carefully calibrated to match requirements with availability of resources for system change. Some bold education reforms have moved so fast with high-stakes requirements that they have outrun improvements in the delivery system and commitments of resources for change. The lack of desired results is not the fault of having high expectations. The limits of achievement result from schools lacking the opportunities for all children to achieve new expectations and from lack of motivation for students to achieve at higher levels.

4. We must help the public and policy leaders understand the scope and boldness of reform and the expected rates of progress in education, keeping in perspective other major public and private challenges. Comparisons with initiatives to provide affordable, high-quality medical care to all or attain substantial reductions in welfare dependency are informative. Early stages of such bold initiatives have left gaps between intentions and results. But shortfalls have not led to abandonment of the vision and mission; they have generated mid-course corrections. Examples of the pace, persistence, and benchmarks of large-scale social change are important to shore up public and educator confidence about the complexity and the importance of sustained education reform.

5. Education reforms alone will not overcome deprivations of nutrition, child care, housing, health, family support, and other conditions which impede successful student progress. We are committed to strategic partnerships among community, business, faith institutions, and educators as essential to overcome poverty and deprivation and assure success in education.

Priority Actions for CCSSO in 2001

To support the states and the effectiveness of state education agencies to accelerate success with education reform, the Council has set this agenda for 2001:

1. Promote Instructional Change in Every Classroom

Aggressively support professional development for all educators about how to use the best, research-based teaching practices in every classroom.

2. Identify Examples of Districts and Schools that Improve

Work with partners in other education organizations to identify schools and school districts where all students are improving their performance so that the key factors contributing to success—quality in the classroom, leadership, parent and community support—are publicized.

3. Measure Progress More Effectively

Establish better indicators and multiple benchmarks to measure the pace and progress of reform. Monitor the indicators of school climate, parent participation, teacher quality, and overall school profiles in addition to academic achievement, dropout rates, student mobility, poverty measures, and resource allocation. Determine realistic rates of expected student gains related to reforms.

4. Develop Broad Support

Rally major political, business, and community forces to advocate for the standards-based reforms and support mid-course corrections of implementation strategies.

5. Coordinate Services

Promote strategic partnerships among state and

community agencies to coordinate adequate health care, housing, child care, and nutrition services with education.

6. Enhance the State Role

Aggressively support a strong state role to ensure educational and financial equity for all students, provide high-quality service to districts and schools, and assure public accountability.

7. Support the Deputies' Leadership Commission's Actions to Strengthen State Education Agencies

Increase the role of deputies for supporting chief education officers in state agency implementation of the Council's 2001 priority.

8. Implement the CCSSO Action Plan for Leadership for Learning

Improve student achievement through the State Action for Education Leadership Project, which assists states in strengthening policies and practices for more effective leadership of principals and superintendents. Assist in developing the leadership of teachers, students, parents, school board members, and community representatives to sustain and advance the agenda of reform.

Conclusion

Taken together, these actions will enable the states and the Council to continue leadership in bolstering public and political support, in making mid-course adjustments to deliver quality teaching and learning matched to the expectations of standards, and in orchestrating the communities of interest which must advocate for the resources needed to improve education capacity and results.

We must accelerate our efforts to help all students meet the challenges of high standards. We must ensure opportunity for all of them to succeed.

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